

**Opening Statement of Chairman Marsha Blackburn
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology hearing on
“Realizing the Benefits of Rural Broadband:
Challenges and Solutions”
July 17, 2018**

(As prepared for delivery)

Welcome to today’s subcommittee hearing on rural broadband challenges and solutions. Extending the reach of broadband in rural Tennessee, and across America, is critical to ensure everyone can participate in the digital economy.

While the percentage of rural Tennesseans still lacking access to high speed internet has decreased from 34% to 23%, we must continue to push. You can’t have a 21st century economy without a 21st century internet.

Since passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, the private sector has invested roughly \$1.6 trillion in their networks using different technologies. Understanding different technologies is key because broadband is more than just fiber. Moreover, we should acknowledge private investment in rural deployment, and ensure that government-based solutions complement private investment instead of competing with it.

For example, I’m pleased we have the Satellite Industry Association testifying so we can learn about the strides they’re making to deploy modern satellites capable of delivering broadband internet anywhere in the country.

Almost 6 months ago, I chaired a hearing on closing the digital divide.

Hearings are useful, but as Chairman, I like to focus on bipartisan results. Today’s hearing allows us to check our progress finding solutions and getting work done.

I’m proud to report the members of this Subcommittee have worked together and have accomplished a lot to expand broadband access in rural America.

In March, Congress passed RAY BAUM’S Act – the most significant rural broadband legislation to become law in the last six years. The bill was named in honor of the Energy and Commerce Committee’s staff director, Ray Baum, who passed away earlier this year. Ray was a champion for rural America, and naming a rural broadband bill for him is a fitting tribute to his career of public service.

RAY BAUM's Act incorporated several legislative proposals we examined at our hearing in January.

I'll let our subcommittee members discuss their legislative solutions, but I would like to highlight a couple that positively impact the people of Tennessee, and Americans everywhere.

Ms. Eshoo and Mr. McKinley took the reins on broadband conduits – the idea that the Department of Transportation should facilitate broadband infrastructure on highway projects that use federal dollars. I'm very glad we could work with Ms. Eshoo to finally get it done.

Mr. Kinzinger and Mr. Loebsack worked together to require the Federal Communications Commission to study the potential of using spectrum more efficiently for the benefit of rural areas.

Lastly, our full committee Chairman, Greg Walden, took on the difficult issue of ensuring the solvency of the Broadcaster Relocation Fund. Wireless broadband providers spent over \$19.8 billion at auction for TV spectrum. Ensuring the solvency of the Relocation Fund is crucial to putting this spectrum to use for broadband, especially in rural areas.

After passage of RAY BAUM'S Act, the subcommittee passed two more rural broadband bills:

- The Precision Agriculture Connectivity Act from Mr. Latta and Mr. Loebsack; and
- The ACCESS BROADBAND Act from Mr. Tonko and Mr. Lance.

These bills were reported out of full committee just last week.

All of this shows that Congress can – in fact – roll up its sleeves to get things done. But we cannot rest on our laurels.

Rural broadband remains a challenge, and there are still unserved areas that need to be connected.

With limited federal dollars to go around, we simply cannot afford to allow overbuilding to take place while so many areas are left completely unserved.

We need to encourage states to find solutions that best suit their needs.

We will not stop working, and I'm proud to lead this subcommittee in working with the President to find bipartisan solutions.